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Decision points in child welfare: An action research model to address disproportionality

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Abstract

Researchers conduct secondary analysis of data collected in community-based focus groups convened to analyze key decision points where racial disproportionality grew wider in child welfare. Analysis confirms findings of other research pointing to referral bias, unclear or problematic policies related to engaging kin, the confounding role of poverty, and racial disparities in the availability of services to ameliorate family problems. A new finding suggested by this work was that lack of professional awareness of the influence of bias is in and of itself a barrier. Authors assert that professionals who believe the court system is fair and rational will not be vigilant in seeking out checks and balances to racial bias and may also be less likely to seek training or consciousness-raising experiences to address their own bias. The research methodology used serves as an example of ways university-based researchers can learn with community-based action planning coalitions to stimulate systems change.

Keywords: Disproportionality; Child welfare; African Americans; Referral bias; Caseworker bias; Decision points

1. Introduction

Racial disproportionality in child welfare has been identified as a priority for action across the nation. In King County, Washington, a task force of local child welfare leaders, professionals, and activists commissioned researchers to collect baseline information to inform community action planning to remedy racial disproportionality in child welfare outcomes. The first stage of this

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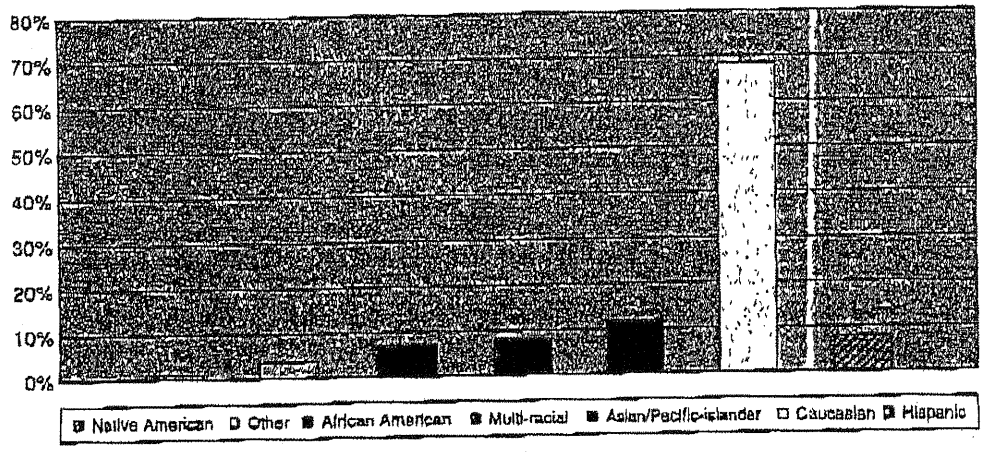

Fig. 1. King County child population.

research, reported in 2004 (Racial Disproportionality in the Child Welfare System in King County, Washington) was a review of administrative data to map the percentage of each ethnic group in the child population at each of five selected decision points in the child welfare system.[2]

This review revealed an increasing disparity along racial lines the deeper children got into the system. That is, children of color were represented in increasingly higher percentages, as compared to their white counterparts, at each successive decision point in the child welfare pathway. Children of color were disproportionally more likely to be represented among referrals investigated, be placed in out-of-home care rather than receive in-home services, have longer lengths of stay, and experience a long wait for adoption. This disparity was most pronounced for African American and Native American children and became the focus of the community's subsequent actions.

Of this first stage research, the most striking finding was that African American and Native American children represented over half (51%) of the population of children in out-of-home care longer than four years. This contrasted dramatically with their percentage in the county's general child population (refer to Fig. 1). The research reported here is the second stage of exploration commissioned by the Community Action Team. Researchers conducted focus groups with people (professionals, community stakeholders, youth and families) involved in decision-making at each stage. The intention of the focus groups was to seek information about the mechanisms of decision-making at each decision point that might suggest sources of the disproportionality. The initial findings were reported to the Community Action Team and served as the basis for planning to change the system. This article expands the findings from the initial study and reports on secondary analysis of data from focus groups.

2. Literature review

2.1. Documenting disproportionality

Disproportionality in outcomes based on race or ethnicity has been observed in child welfare for more than thirty years (Billingsley & Giovanni, 1972). More current literature confirm that

[2] The methodology of structuring research by decision points was suggested by work in health sciences (personal conversation with Dr. David Takeuchi by Katharine Cahn in 2002) and in juvenile justice (Pope & Feyerherm, 1992).

this persists as a problem nationally and in a range of local jurisdictions and states (Bowser & Jones, 2004; Caliber & Associates, 2003; Harris & Skyles, 2005; Hill, 2001; Hines, Lemon, & Wyatt, 2004). According to Perez, O'Neil, and Gesiriech (2002), African American children make up 15% of the national child population and 41% of the foster care population.

Native American children make up 1% of the national child population and 2% of the foster care population. In areas with higher Native American populations, such as Washington State or Alaska the disparity is even wider.

Much of the research conducted on disproportionality has been descriptive, drawing on a review of administrative data. Often the work looks at specific steps and stages in child welfare, documenting disparities at many points. This approach is based on work originally conducted in juvenile justice, where a similar pattern occurs (Pope & Feyerherm, 1992).

An extensive literature has now documented disparities at many points along the child welfare pathway. Studies document disparities at the point of referral (Chand, 2000; Karp, 2001; Drug Policy Alliance, 2005); at the point of assignment for investigation (Zuravin, Orme, & Hegar, 1995); in the substantiation of the alleged abuse or neglect, though findings here are mixed (Hill, 2001); in the likelihood of out-of-home placement instead of reunification (DHHS, 2005, quoted in Hill, 2005a; Goerge & Lee, in press; Needell, Brookhart, & Lee, 2001); and in the likelihood of longer stays in care. This latter finding concerning longer stays in care for children of color has been called the "most durable finding across all studies" (Wulczyn, 2003).

Children of color may stay in care longer because they take longer to exit the child welfare system. They are less likely to reunify (Harris & Courtney, 2003) and they take longer to be adopted (Barth, 1997; Goerge, 1990) though they are equally likely to be adopted (Wulczyn, 2003).

This research, though useful, is only the first step. It documents differential outcomes at each stage in the process, but does not reveal the mechanisms underlying the decision-making, and as such provides an incomplete foundation for action planning purposes.

Some advanced analysis of administrative data or other large data sets has applied statistical analysis to explore possible factors contributing to the differential outcomes. Several authors have attempted to create models of disproportionality that capture the complexity of decision-making within and external to the child welfare system. They have explored the impact of causes external to the child welfare system itself, as well as internal factors. Causes Attributed to Dynamics outside the Child Welfare System.

An oft-cited link (external to the child welfare system itself) is the link between poverty, child welfare, and race. There is a demonstrated link between poverty and likelihood of child abuse. According to Sedlak and Broadhurst (1996), there are "significant and pervasive differences in the incidence of maltreatment...in relation to family income" (p. 5–2); their findings also revealed that children living below the poverty level were 16 to 41 times more likely to be referred for abuse. The over-representation of children of color in the ranks of the poor is well-documented. The argument linking the three is that 'children of color are more likely to be poor; poor children are more likely to victims of abuse; and therefore children of color are more likely to be abused and to enter the child welfare system because of it.' But this argument is not supported by the data. In fact several authors (Morton, 1999; Sedlak & Schultz, 2001; Sedlak & Schultz, 2005) point out that multiple waves of the National Incidence Studies show that despite their higher representation in the ranks of the poor, there is no higher rate of abuse in African American or Native American families.

Ards, Chung, and Meyers (1998) say that there may be problems with the selection process in the National Incidence Studies, and that the findings should be viewed with caution, However,

others (Chand, 2000) say that higher incidence of participation in child welfare (despite no higher incidence of abuse) may be due to 'visibility' or 'exposure' bias — that children of color, by virtue of being poor, are more likely to be visible to the child welfare system. As their families turn to the public social service system (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), public medical care, or public housing) for support in times of need problems that other families could keep private become public and subject to mandatory reporting laws in each state. "Private troubles and public issues," was explored by Mills (1959) and seems quite apropos when one examines disproportionality at the point of referral and at other key decision points for African American and Native American children. As long as disproportionality is viewed as an individual or personal issue of African American and Native American children or other children of color, the solutions to disproportionality will not be focused in the public domain of the child welfare system, a system that created and has continued to perpetuate disproportionality.

Referent bias has also been cited as a source for disproportionality at the point of entry into the system. One place this has been documented is in the medical system, a common source of referrals to Child Protective Services (CPS). Bias may exist on the part of those observing women as they give birth. For example, though white women and black women were equally likely to test positive for drugs, African American women were 10 times more likely to be reported to CPS after delivery (Karp, 2001; Drug Policy Alliance, 2005).

2.2. *Causes within the system*

If the only sources of disproportional outcomes were those external to child welfare, then the gap in outcomes along racial lines should not grow wider once children cross the threshold into child protection and foster care, but it does in this county. The Action Planning Team in King County was interested in addressing dynamics that contributed to the impact of child welfare decision-making on the increasing gap between children of differing races in terms of the proportionality of their presence along the child welfare path.

Using administrative data and focus groups, previous researchers have explored possible contributing factors within the child welfare decision process. This research understands 'the child welfare system' to include the public child welfare agency and in addition the affiliated service providers and court and legal structures that participate in ameliorating family problems, caring for children, and attending to timely legal decision-making and due process for all parties.

Racial inequity in service availability and service delivery is the strongest contributing factor implicated in the disproportional numbers of children of color in placement in child welfare. Research consistently documents that fewer and poorer quality social services are available to children of color and their caregivers (Close, 1983; Courtney, Barth, Berrick, Brooks, & Parks, 1996; Tracy, Green, & Bremseth, 1993; Saunders, Nelson, & Landsman, 1993; Stehno, 1982; Stehno, 1990).

Rodenbery (2004)found that this held true even when controlling for poverty. She found that children of color and their families were less likely to receive services to ameliorate the impact of poverty, such as housing and employment support, than Caucasian families. She also cited findings of Gruber (1980) and others who noted greater use of corrections than treatment for children of color.

Though African American parents are more likely to be referred for drug treatment, their services were found to be less adequate (Walker, Zangrillo, & Smith, 1994). Other researchers (Garland, Landsverk, & Lau, 2002) found this to be true of mental health services as well. A large sample of Native Americans and other ethnic groups were included in a study by Olsen (1982);

findings revealed that Native American families had the least chance to have services recommended of all ethnic groups in this study.

The greater use of kinship care for children of color also adds to the complexity of the analysis. The literature shows that kinship caregivers (regardless of race) receive fewer services than do foster parents (Berrick, Barth, & Needell, 1994).

Administrative data are limited in their ability to explore the complexities of human decision-making. Administrative data can capture and document decision pathways, but not the thinking that went into making the decision and not the context in which the decisions were made. One can witness racial disparity in an outcome and infer that institutional racism exists, but that still does not reveal the mechanism of this racism.

2.3. Understanding institutional discrimination and individual bias

One framework for understanding and describing institutional discrimination has been recapitulated by Feagin and Feagin (1986). Their schema, as cited in Rodenbery (2004), includes both direct and indirect forms of discrimination as well as discrimination occurring through the acts of individuals, groups, or by an entire organization. Hill et al. (1993) distinguish 'intentional institutional racism' as a term which refers to the disparate impact on different racial groups of societal forces or policies that were not intentionally discriminatory (Derezotes & Poertner, 2005).

Institutional discrimination is important to analyze. However, child welfare decision-making is never free of subjective bias. Decisions that permanently affect a child or family's fate are made on a daily basis by individual caseworkers, attorneys, service providers, or judges.

Tatora (1989, as cited in Derezotes & Poertner, 2005) has reported the extent to which caseworkers rely on "intuition, experience, and interviewer engagement skills" to assess child safety. In the years since this observation was made, child welfare has instituted a series of checks and balances on decision-making in an attempt to rationalize the process. For example, researchers have found that the use of structured decision-making tools at the investigation stage appear to reduce the impact of racial bias and consequent racial disproportionality in decisions made (Johnson, 1999; Wiebush, Freitag, & Baird, 2001). However, the role of individual bias cannot be completely eliminated, and must be considered in any analysis of child welfare decision-making.

2.4. Use of focus groups

In an attempt to look at the human decision-making processes behind the administrative data, some research draws on professional or stakeholder speculation of what might be the source of the persistent disparity in outcomes. A series of nine focus groups held with professional child welfare workers around the country (Caliber & Associates, 2003), identified three themes: the higher prevalence of kinship care and lack of funding to support kinship care; lack of culturally-based services (such as African American therapists, drug treatment); and lower understanding of the court processes by poor people of color.

Focus groups, while valuable, should not be relied upon exclusively. Commonly-held practice impressions sometimes are not supported by data. For example, it is commonly assumed that a child welfare worker who is a person of color will demonstrate less bias towards a child welfare client of the same race. An extensive review of the literature conducted in 1996 (Courtney et al.) found no evidence that race-matching was effective in improving outcomes for children of color. This was later confirmed in a review by Derezotes and Poertner (2005).

It would seem therefore that a complete study would combine information from administrative data as well as focus groups or other qualitative explorations with those involved to understand the policy and attitudinal context shaping decisions.

2.5. Use of research to inform action

The concern about racial disproportionality has given rise to research and action at the national level. For example, The Race Matters Consortium, funded by Casey Family Programs and the State of Illinois has held several research forums to examine research findings, resulting in the publication of *Race matters in child welfare* in 2005 (Testa et al.). Casey Family Programs has sponsored local action around the country.

3. Methodology

This study is a secondary analysis of data collected for the Racial Disproportionality in the Child Welfare System in King County, Washington research study (King County Coalition on Racial Disproportionality, 2004). "Mixed" methodology (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003) was used to compare the trajectory of African American, Native American, and Caucasian children ($n=6518$) at five decision points along the child welfare continuum: 1) reporting for abuse and neglect; 2) referral of the report for investigation; 3) reunification services; 4) out-of-home placement and termination of parental rights; and 5) pathways to exiting the system. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected and the data were integrated at different stages of inquiry and analyses. Qualitative and quantitative methods are viewed by many researchers as being complementary (Creswell, 2003; Thomas, 2003; Krathwohl, 1993). "If we focus research only on what we already know how to quantify, indeed only on that which can ultimately be reliably quantified, we risk ignoring factors that are more significant in explaining realities and relationships" (Sofaer, 1999, p. 1102). The use of a mixed methods approach resulted in a final disproportionality database that included a broad spectrum of quantitative and qualitative information. Basic descriptive statistics used agency information to describe proportionality and disproportionality at each decision point.

In the quantitative stage of the research, administrative data demonstrated that children of color were likely to have a different set of experiences at key decision points in child welfare than their white counterparts (refer to Fig. 2).

To provide context for these findings it was necessary to take a qualitative approach designed to get at the thinking of decision makers at each key point in the pathway. Teams of researchers and community action partners convened focus groups of personnel at each stage of the process asking "how do you make decisions at this point in the process?" In addition, groups with a particular vantage point (such as youth, fathers, and service providers) were convened.

In all, researchers conducted 11 focus groups that included 66 respondents. Groups included the following: 1) Mandated reporters from hospitals, mental health, public health, schools, and interim care, regarding reporting; 2) Child Welfare Intake staff; 3) Child Protective Services staff regarding decision-making for services vs. removal; 5) Attorneys, Attorney General's office, court officials (administrator, commissioner, dependency supervisor, court liaison), public defenders regarding court processes addressing dependency and termination of parental rights; 6) Service providers including mental health, family preservation, and foster parents.; 7) Attorney General's office, CASA Program, Court Operations, Family Drug Court, Juvenile Court Judges, Child Welfare Services

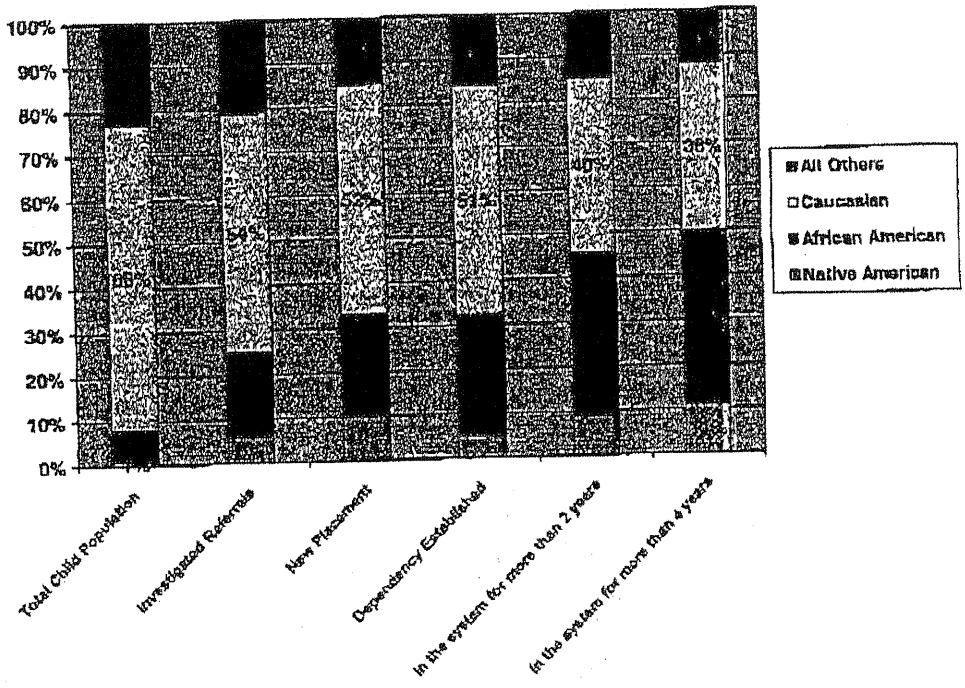

Fig. 2. Summary — children entering, or in the system.

workers/supervisors regarding alternate exit pathways; 8) Staff involved specifically with Native American child welfare services; 9) Staff involved specifically with services to African American children and families through a specialized unit (The Office of African American Children's Services); 10) Fathers participating in a fatherhood support group; and 11) Youth involved in foster care. With the exception of #10 and 11, extensive notes were taken by the researchers during the focus group sessions. All focus group sessions were audio taped and transcripts were typed verbatim. The data were coded; the content was analyzed for patterns and themes.

The interviewers and the analysts for data collected in the focus groups were selected because of their own lived experience of racism as people of color, as well as their familiarity with theories of racism. Focus group facilitators were sensitive to the underlying dynamics of racism. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), this "theoretical sensitivity" is an allowable, in fact important, part of qualitative analysis. Preparing the lens through which the qualitative data will be understood is a critical part of the work of qualitative analysis, which does not assume that the researcher enters her work with an entirely blank slate. Theoretical sensitivity can also be viewed as a process of developing insight that the researcher brings to the research study (Glaser, 1978). The research team, which is racially mixed, believes that this choice contributed to the ability to discern dynamics that might have gone unobserved by analysts without such sensitivity.

4. Results

Focus group analysis shed light on dynamics at the following five key decision points: 1) reporting for abuse and neglect; 2) referral of the report for investigation; 3) reunification services;

4) out-of-home placement and termination of parental rights; and 5) pathways to exiting the system.

4.1 Reporting for abuse and neglect and referral for investigation (assessment of risk)

Findings from administrative data revealed a disproportionate number of referrals accepted for investigation for African American and Native American children (refer to Table 1). Several themes emerged from the focus group with mandated reporters. The process was confusing.

A common theme from professionals who work with African American and Native American children and families was a recognition that not all workers were prepared to understand or take into account the impact played by culture or race in their own process of assessing risk or in the family's approach to child safety. Some believed that race or culture played no role and others believed that they lacked the training or awareness to understand the role that race or culture might play in their own process of assessment. Prior work has shown the significance of self-awareness for practitioners (Harris, 1997; Merta, 1995; Sue & Sue, 1990). According to Harris (2004), it is imperative for practitioners to understand "their own biases, prejudices, racist thoughts and feelings" (p. 163).

Mandated reporters were asked, "What do you do with culture as you are assessing risk?" Examples of replies included:

- "I don't really think culture is a factor in assessing risk and safety. Some workers have the ability to adjust in their head given these people's history and such. For example, what age do you leave children to be supervised? Our bilingual worker will decide if this is a higher or lower risk than for the general population. The risk factor will be based on her experience with families in this culture. We would accept the worker's ability to adjust risk based on her own experience."
- "They are not from a different country [African Americans and Native Americans], but they may be viewing things differently and we don't think about that."

Mandated reporters were asked if there were things that were different in African American and Native American families.

- "We don't always recognize what differences we should be getting help on with African American families. We don't consciously think about things that African Americans may be viewing differently. With African American families their cultural differences are so subtle than say a Samoan family. I don't think we necessarily have done so much around African American families unless there is something that rises to the level that is different that we recognize and therein lies the problem. For African American families I am not sure that we recognize the differences we should be getting help on."

Table 1
Referrals accepted for investigation

	Percent of King County child population (2000 census) $n=390,646$ (%)	Percent of children involved in accepted referrals (FY 2000) $n=8255$ (%)
Caucasian	68	54
African American	7	19
Native American	1	6

Note: To calculate proportionality, the percent of children involved in accepted referrals was divided by the percent of children in the child population: 54/68=0.8; 19/7=2.7; 6/1=6. Then the result was divided by Caucasians (0.8) to compare the results for other races to that of Caucasian children: 2.7/0.8=3 (African American children are 3 times more likely than Caucasian children to be involved in an accepted referral); 6/0.8=7 (Native American children are 7 times more likely than Caucasian children to be involved in an accepted referral). (Caliber & Associates, 2003).

- "We don't have a daily cultural competence attitude and we need that."
- "I, as a white woman, have not been taught anything about black history."
- "You're always going to be harsher with, more critical of, people who are different than you."

Consistent with previous studies (Lane, Rubin, Monteith, & Christian, 2002) that note racial disproportionality in the process of investigating cases and in the percentage of abuse allegations that are substantiated, this research finds a disproportionate representation among referrals opened for investigation in King County. "The process of investigating and making decisions about a child abuse case is to some degree subjective and therefore necessarily open to the influence of racial basis" (Cahn & Harris, 2005, p. 7). However, the evidence is clear that racial bias exists in the assessment of risk, sending children and families of color into the child welfare system at a higher rate. The disproportionate number of children of color in the child welfare system is reflective of racism that exists in the larger society.

4.2. Reunification services

Findings from King County focus groups revealed differences in how family preservation and reunification efforts are implemented. African American and Native American cultural norms which include support and use of the resources of extended family versus individuals are too often not considered. This finding is congruent with one of the most consistent findings in the national literature. First of all, prior research has repeatedly shown a difference by race in the percentage of families who are offered in-home-services. "The majority of African American children (56%) were placed in foster care, while the majority of Caucasian children (72%) received services in their home (U.S. Children's Bureau, 1997; Barth, 2001; Goerge & Lee, in press; Needell et al., 2001). Focus group participants expressed concern about service delivery and believed that children and families of color did not get services as consistently as white children and families.

The administrative data showed that children of color were likely to stay in care longer and had lower reunification rates (refer to Tables 2 and 3).

To explore what might lead to this outcome, focus groups were held with service providers most often contracted to provide family preservation or reunification services. Two themes emerged: differing beliefs about the importance of race-matching in service provision, and different levels of willingness to refer across racial barriers depending on whether the agency was mainstream (majority white) or based in a community of color.

Opinions on whether race mattered in the provision of services tended to vary according to the race of the informant. Service providers based in communities of color tended to say that racially-specific services were important, whereas those from majority white agencies tended to downplay the importance of race or ethnicity in providing reunification services. This

Table 2
Children placed in out-home-care >60 days

	Percent of King County child population (2000 Census) $n=390,646$ (%)	Percent of all new placements> 60 days (FY 2002) $n=1437$ (%)
Caucasian	68	52
African American	7	23
Native American	1	10
Hispanic (ethnicity)	8	11

Caliber and Associates (2003).

Table 3
Children exiting the system 2002

Children exiting the system, by race (2002)	Exits through reunification as a percent of all exits (%)	Exits through adoption as a percent of all exits (%)	Exits through guardianship as a percent of all exits (%)
Caucasian $n=682$	71	12	10
African American $n=322$	63	15	14
Multi-racial $n=111$	58	14	19
Native American	54	21	16

Caliber & Associates (2003).

difference seemed to carry into referral patterns. For example, a white social worker in one focus group stated, "I look at them [African American parents] to decide if they need services."

This type of racial bias is a disadvantage for any African American parent who encounters this social worker. After-all, how can one objectively determine if any parent needs services by looking at her/him? A review of the literature by Courtney et al. (1996) "suggests a pattern of inequality, if not discrimination, based on race and ethnicity in the provision of child welfare services.' The focus groups in this county supported this finding and shoed differences in the value of or utilization of services that were culturally or racially matched.

The assumptions and beliefs of social workers were reported as challenges faced by families who needed reunification services. Consistent with national findings, worker attitudes and bias in the study region appears to play a significant role in determining the quality and quantity of services. "Racist attitude of workers who assume there are no resources in the families or extended families [attitude of] so why bother, we can put services in and it will not help!" and/or "Racist belief that people don't change based on the stereotype and so worker has low expectations." These types of racist attitudes, beliefs and behaviors are indicative of social workers who lack self-awareness as well as cultural sensitivity.

Focus groups with service providers yielded a clear theme discussing the extent to which dominant culture or ethnic community-based providers are/are not fully utilized across race to provide services to families. African American service providers reported that their services were requested less often than Caucasian service providers; when their services were requested they were less likely to deliver services to families across races...

- "We don't get white kids referred to us in the same proportion that a white agency does. Mainstream agencies get white kids and children of color while agencies of color get fewer kids all around
- "White families have asked for a Black service provider to be taken off a case."

A white service provider reported a belief that there are African American and Native American workers who will only refer to race-specific service providers.

- "They say if I can't find a race-specific service provider, I'm not going to get services for this kid' even if there are predominantly white programs, they aren't accessed."
- "Our agency which is seen as a white agency: [is] seeing a majority of children who are mixed race or minority in some way (kids not their parents) and we have a good success rate of mitigating placement."

An African American services provider reported the opposite experience.

- "We have to fight for our children to get services."

Another African American service provider stated,

- "Race is a factor of life in the US, and to not consider race and culture is unrealistic and to not identify services that meet their [African American] unique needs is unconscionable. I wouldn't presume to go into an Asian family and tell them what they needed culturally."

4.3. *Out-of-home placement and termination of parental rights and pathways to exit the system*

When services to preserve families or reunify children with parents fail, law and policy require a prioritization of permanent placement with parents or close relatives. Three themes emerged from focus groups held to look at this decision point. A theme of focus groups particularly for families of color, was that fathers and other relatives were routinely excluded from the process, that there was a bias against them and that this was particularly true for fathers and families of color. In contrast to this widely-held belief some white court personnel believed the court to be objective and unbiased, while others noted a lack of checks and balances in case bias were to enter in. Some white professionals in the court system think it is fair... Where it is clearly not experienced as fair by people of color, nor does it produce fair outcomes. The following are comments from white professionals in the focus group for court personnel:

- "The court system is anonymous by nature, based on risk factors which are fact based. The court process is not arbitrary, it's fact based. What is it about the community of origin that causes disproportionality, lack of resources, perceptions of government" How protective of their own are communities?"

Across all key decision points there was a resounding theme that fathers were devalued, not recognized as family members, and not included in the permanency planning process by most professionals. Comments from the focus group with court personnel and the focus group with fathers spoke to an explicit systemic bias against fathers, and in particular against fathers of color. The following comments are from legal or court professionals.

- "I have a problem with any African American male over the age of twelve," was a statement from one court appointed attorney. African American birth fathers who encounter this attorney will most likely have a negative court experience.
- We don't look at fathers and [we] make assumptions about fathers, not present and not valued."

Members of the focus group with fathers agreed. A father commented

- "Rules are the tools for people with money, power, and influence, not for the poor father who wants to do right by his children."

Men in that focus group noted that symbols of money and power (i.e. the man who is suited and booted), played a powerful role in providing cues of class and privilege. They were aware that these symbols could prejudice the outcome of judicial rulings. As one uncle said to his nephew, "...when you dress in braids and baggies, they will think you are a thug."

A poor track record in searching for and placing with relatives was a second theme that emerged from focus groups looking at decisions surrounding out-of-home placement and termination of parental rights. According to Laird (1979), "Ecologically oriented child welfare practice attends to, nurtures and supports the biological family. Furthermore, when it is necessary to substitute for the biological family, good practice dictates that every effort is made to preserve and protect kinship ties" (p. 175). It is important to make all reasonable efforts to find, support and provide services to relatives once children enter the child welfare system.

- "We have trouble convincing workers to look for relatives outside the state."
- "The search for relatives hasn't been done or hasn't been done right."

A third major theme from court personnel was a belief that the processes in the child welfare system are objective and decisions are evidence-based. It was clear that decision makers feel that the system is objective and without bias. Consequently, these informants would be unlikely to acknowledge the need for checks and balances for bias in their own decision- making and those of others they supervise or manage.

Others acknowledged the subjectivity of the process and were concerned that there were not enough checks and balances in the court system.

- "Judges aren't asking the right questions. We need to get better judicial oversight of these kids."

Findings from the focus groups indicated that the courts need to completely revamp their system of checks and balances.

5. Discussion

This article adds to the growing literature on the extent of disproportionality of children of color in the child welfare system, especially African American and Native American children. It helps to illuminate that African and Native American children are more likely to be involved in referrals accepted for investigations; investigations are more likely to result in a founded referral for African Americans and Native Americans. The study also revealed the consistently long stays in out-of-home care for African American and Native American children, lower reunification rates, and that they are more likely to be adopted or in guardianship than Caucasian children.

This study is an example of research conducted in partnership with community stakeholders. Decision-making appears to be the result of interdependent processes from multiple systems and is influenced by multiple factors. Analysis of focus group responses confirms earlier research that both attitudinal and structural factors appear to influence outcomes of decision-making. Focus groups participants expressed concern with patterns of reporting for abuse and neglect in King County, Washington. Across the nation high level of frustration and confusion continue to exist regarding the reporting process. Questions repeatedly surface about the possibility of bias and racial differences in community standards leading to racial disproportionality in entry into the child welfare system. Our society finds it easier to blame the victim and to focus on the problems of individual African American and Native American children and families than to take a critical look at racist social conditions that create and perpetuate these problems.

Disproportionality of children of color in the child welfare system is not just an individual child or family issue but a large social issue. An equitable child welfare system would be

proportional, even if there were racial disproportionality in referrals, from that point on; the system in King County is not. At each successive decision point, the gap in outcomes widens according to race.

Child welfare policy stipulates that social workers must make reasonable (or, active efforts for Native American children) to keep children at home or to reunify children with parents as soon as possible when emergency removal is necessary. This policy is predicated on the belief that children should be safe and in the care of parents or kin if possible. An agency must demonstrate to an officer of the court that reasonable efforts have first been made to keep a child at home before the court will remove a child from a parent's care. Several checks and balances were developed to expedite family reunification or some other permanency goal once a child is placed in out-of-home care. However, findings from King County focus groups revealed differences in how family preservation and reunification efforts are implemented. African American and Native American cultural norms which include support and use of the resources of extended family members versus individuals are too often not considered.

When a child has to be separated from her/his parent either temporarily (dependency petition) or permanently (termination of parental rights petition) this experience is emotionally traumatic for the child as well as the birth parents. Racial bias among workers or other professionals or race and class differential between professionals and clients might lead to cultural misunderstanding and have been noted in the literature, and confirmed by findings of this study. One recommendation from the literature is for a guide or coach for families (Caliber & Associates, 2003). Given the inherent subjectivity of many decisions that must be made in child welfare, checks and balances have to be put in place at each decision point in the child welfare system to assure fair and equitable treatment of African American, Native American, and other children and families of color and eradicate disproportionality in King County and in other child welfare systems in this country.

The child welfare system can follow the lead of the King County Coalition on Racial Disproportionality. The Coalition made a commitment to become anti-racist and members are continuously doing the work to change racist patterns. Child welfare professionals need to be conscious of their underlying bias which increases the importance of checks and balances. "Fortunately, organizations, like individuals, can evolve to become anti-racist. The transformation begins with developing a comprehensive understanding of how racism and oppression operate within an organization's own walls. From that analysis comes a commitment and concrete plans for dismantling racism within the organization and in the larger society" (Western States Center Views, 2001, p. 14). The time is now for dismantling individual and institutional racism in the child welfare system in King County in order to ensure that African American, Native American and other children and families of color are no longer disproportionately represented in that system; if it is necessary for these children to enter the system no disparities must exist in treatment or services that they receive. Finally, any child of color entering the child welfare system will not be left to languish in the system due to racist child welfare practices. The problem of disproportionality at key child welfare decision points in King County can be eliminated by eradicating individual and systemic racism and by developing and implementing policies, practices and procedures that demonstrate cultural competency as well as a high degree of cultural sensitivity.

6. Limitations

One serious limitation of the quantitative data presented in this article is that it was collected through information from systems reports designed to provide managers with data on how the system is performing (i.e. how many referrals, dependencies, placements, or reunifications occurred in a certain time period), as a consequence, different results and different conclusions might be drawn

from the day of their referral to their exit from the system. The bulk of the quantitative data came from the Children's Administration Management Information System (CAMIS). The Children's Administration cautions that there are always data integrity issues that may affect the accuracy of data and/or conclusions drawn from the data.

A second serious limitation of the data is the relatively small number of informants in any one professional category (as small as one mandated reporter for a reporting category or two judges, etc.). This limitation is somewhat offset by the inclusion of participants representative functionalities across the child welfare system; the total number of informants (90) and the use of structured protocols which allowed multiple sets of participants to respond to the similar questions when appropriate.

7. Conclusions

The quantitative analysis of administrative data showed that the region under study reflected national patterns of racial and ethnic disproportionality in child welfare outcomes. The qualitative analysis revealed findings confirmatory of other studies and suggested new patterns for further research. Specifically, the focus groups supported previous findings that

1. Subjective factors in the risk assessment processes may open the door for racial bias in assigning cases for investigation.
2. A lack of culturally specific remedial services (family preservation, mental health, substance abuse) or differences in perception regarding the value of these services may result in fewer in-home services to support the preservation of families of color and could play a role in differences between in-home placement vs. out-of-home services, and in the filing of dependencies.
3. Bias against fathers who do not dress consistent with the dominant court culture and failure to seek fathers or other relatives may increase the number of children of color remaining in out-of-home care rather than reunifying with family or kin.
4. A perception that the court process is objective may allow the bias reported in #3 above to proceed unchecked.

The focus groups also showed findings that have not been widely-reported or explored in the arena of individual bias. In particular it was clear that many decision makers feel that the system is objective and without bias. Such informants would be unlikely to acknowledge the need for checks and balances for bias in their own decision-making and those of others they supervise or manage. Others believe that subjective decisions can be made cross-culturally with a high degree of accuracy, without concern. Again, such professionals are unlikely to seek checks and balances in their own decision-making.

The national conversation on addressing and solving the racial and ethnic disproportionality of negative outcomes has often focused intervention recommendations on policy and practice changes. In light of the finding regarding ignorance of the possibility of bias, the Coalition recognized the need to intervene at another level — the level of individual perception and knowledge. They provided training for key stakeholders (agency leaders, policy makers, advocates, and social workers) on the dynamics of racism. The dynamic of institutional racism is complex and embedded. It has a long history in child welfare and requires systemic intervention, including actions at every level. Based on this research, agencies and communities with an interest in getting better outcomes for children of color would be well-advised to include an intervention, such as training, regarding the issue of institutional racism. Such training will raise consciousness of the issue and empower professionals

who are involved to take on new organizational strategies, policies and practices within their own sphere of influence.

Finally, this study adds to the literature regarding factors contributing to disproportionality of children of color in the child welfare system, especially African American and Native American children. This study illuminated the major role of the child welfare system in continuously perpetuating disproportionality at five key decision points. Further research is needed to examine individual as well as systemic racism and the impact on children of color and their families at the following key decision points in the child welfare system: 1) reporting for abuse and neglect; 2) referral of the report for investigation; 3) reunification services; 4) out-of-home placement; and 5) termination of parental rights. Future research should continue to evaluate and explore relationships among key decision points, checks and balances at each decision point, and the associations among SES, disparities in services, parenting knowledge and behaviors, and child maltreatment. Causal associations should also be examined. It is imperative for future work to include and carefully listen to the voices of children of color, birth parents, relative caregivers, and foster parents in order to make the changes required in policy and practice to alleviate the problem of disproportionality of children of color in the child welfare system.

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